

Council approves citizens' review panel

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By Raul Ramirez
and Sue Soennichsen
Tribune Staff Writers

After an emotion-packed 4-1/2 hour hearing, (Oakland) City Council early this morning unanimously adopted the concept of forming a citizens' board to review complaints against city employees.

The council decided to work out details of the agreement next week.

The motion by Councilman Carter Gilmore did not specify whether the review panel would apply only to the police department—as recommended by a task force—or to all city employees.

The council agreed to meet at City Hall at 10 a.m. Jan. 17 to develop details of the controversial policy.

Approximately 1,500 persons, the loud majority of them clearly embittered by the police killings of nine black men in shooting incidents during the past 10 months, turned out for the special City Council hearing at the Oakland Auditorium Theatre.

The public session was also attended by Police Chief George Hart, City Manager David Self and City Attorney Michael Lawson. It was to be a forum for opinions on a citizens' task force proposal calling for creation of a five-member appointed panel to review serious complaints of police misconduct.

But few of the dozens of speakers focused on the specific proposal. Instead, some angrily denounced alleged police abuses, or pleaded for city officials not to hamper police work, or spoke of racism, of economic inequities, of fear of crime and of fear of police.

A black policewoman spoke of idealism and disillusionment. Several elderly residents decried increasing crime and violence in

their neighborhoods. A young political activist accused the Oakland Tribune of timidity in its reporting of police violence. And a young revolutionary woman denounced slayings of blacks by police.

The crowd, about two thirds of whom were black, but including people of all races and ages, roared approval of some speakers, jeered at others and generally ignored Mayor Lionel Wilson's

threats to adjourn the session unless speakers were allowed to speak uninterrupted.

The mayor, visibly annoyed when Councilman John Sutter's introduction of the task force proposal—laced with conciliatory words towards the police department—was hooted down, recessed the meeting after a few minutes for a cooling off attempt. The 10-minute recess was used by about 35 supporters of

the Revolutionary Communist Party—who had divided into two groups, along the sides of the large auditorium and hung banners from a balcony—to harangue the crowd through two small loudspeakers.

The RCP contingent was joined by a young black man who paraded throughout the hall carrying a large, freshly butchered,

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pig's head atop a pole bearing a silver paper-star badge.

Finally, after the majority of the crowd cheered Wilson's threat to have hecklers ejected, the meeting resumed.

Richard Groulx, Executive Secretary of the Central Labor Council of Alameda County, endorsed the concept of citizens' review of police, noting that the recent succession of killings of Oakland black men by police was "only one reason" why the proposal should be adopted.

"How many times does a working person get treatment which he cannot accept and he has no way to appeal?" Groulx asked the council. He charged inequities in police handling of civilians: "A person who is disruptive, who gets drunk in Jack London Square in a business suit is treated differently than a person in a neighborhood bar," he said.

But Harold Weinberg, an East Oakland resident active in retired and senior citizens' activities, praised Oakland's police, noting that the city has "an excellent police department."

"We (retired citizens) are being ripped off, knocked down in the streets," Weinberg said.

A citizens police review body, he argued, would merely "add another level of government to this city for us to pay taxes for."

Paul Cobb, of the Oakland Citizens Committee for Urban Renewal (OCCUR), urged the council to adopt a civilian review process, noting that 14 years ago Mayor Wilson, proposed just such a move.

"The police problem and the problem of community review of police have not gone away," Cobb said. "No one in this city is above review and oversight."

Cobb was loudly cheered when he said: "The police and the firemen and all the public servants of this city do not hesitate to accept our tax dollars. We realize that we, with our tax dollars, are supporting 700 policemen of which 80 percent do not live in the City of Oakland."

He urged the mayor and council to take the lead in keeping Oakland from becoming a "racially polarized" community.

Alameda County Supervisor John George said that 42 of the last 55 persons killed by Oakland's police have been black, then noted that most of the killings have been by white officers (who make up the bulk of Oakland's force) then said to loud cheers:

"If there had been 42 white people killed by black officers there is no question that you would have a review board. The question is who rules Oakland — the City Council or the police."

George, however, opposed the specific task force proposal, which calls for a five-member board appointed by the mayor with the consent of the city council. Instead, he said, he supports a proposal advanced by the NAACP—a prime mover behind the citizens review concept—calling for at least nine members. A larger body would allow for wider community representations, he said.

Another key aspect of the NAACP proposal is its call for a review board with authority to review police department policy. The task force proposal specifically excludes such authority.

Many of the evening's speakers suggested that police policies should be scrutinized.

One was William Muir, a University of California political science professor who does not favor the police review board concept, but who believes that Oakland's police gun use policies could be tightened up.

Currently, city policemen are authorized to use their weapons to protect human life or to stop a person who has been involved in a violent felony.

By limiting use of deadly force by police to the protection of their own or of a citizen's life, shooting incidents might be reduced, Muir said.

Officer Lynda Drummer, a black Oakland policewoman who was severely beaten by a suspect

weeks ago, by her account as she hesitated to use her handgun because of recent criticism of police shootings, spoke of the "idealism" of young officers.

That idealism, she said, is shared by most new officers leaving the police academy for active work, but not for long. Police work, she suggested, calls for split-second decisions made by highly trained, specialized individuals.

"Now you ask us to make the ultimate compromise—to be judged by others other than our peers," she said.

She was trailed by catcalls and mocking shouts of "Oh, macho woman," after she left the microphone with a challenge to people whom she said expect officers to place low priority on their own lives: "What price YOUR life? If you can name your price, go ahead, and we will make you an offer you can't refuse."

Equally heated rhetoric came from a backer of police review:

"What's happening is that blacks are being killed by professional murderers and that's the Oakland Police Department," said Kutrina Mix, of the Revolutionary Youth League.

Melvin Lindsey, of the Oakland Chapter of the Campaign for Economic Democracy and an associate of the Oakland Study Center, criticized media coverage of police shooting incidents:

Oakland reporters, including The Tribune's, he said, "have to work with the police department. They can't ask questions, do stories without the police."

Reporters have been timid in their reporting, he said, preferring to accept official police accounts of incidents instead of seeking out other perspectives.

Earl Hunting, of Citizens for Law and Order, suggested that the police review concept was back in the 1930s. He praised Oakland police's internal affairs apparatus that now reviews all complaints against cops, and suggested that persons dissatisfied with it have other avenues of redress, such as grand juries, the district attorney's office, the U.S. Attorney's office and the FBI.

Many speakers said they fa-

vored the stronger NAACP proposal, but it was clear where sentiment of the mayor and several council members lay, as they nodded their agreement to Gerald Rose, of the Merriewood Forest Park Neighborhood Association.

Rose said the proposal "unfairly" targets police.

"By just singling out one group of people you are saying, 'We don't trust you at all,'" Rose said. Wilson said that Rose was echoing his reservations.

Rose said this was one of the reasons why his group opposed the citizens review concept strongly backed in the flatland minority neighborhoods.

The task force's proposal called for a fact-finding, advisory panel to review serious complaints against police, then make recommendations on the facts, but not on punishment or discipline or policy, to the city manager.

Contributing to this story was Tribune staff reporter George Estrada.